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KT photo | **Tim Bath**
Rob Burgess, Tribune night editor

House of Burgess: Missouri's state of pre-emergency

Impending grand jury announcement sure to bring unrest

By Rob Burgess
Tribune columnist

As I write these words, it is 9:26 a.m. Tuesday. I am finishing this column now for publication in Wednesday morning's paper. The grand jury empaneled Aug. 20 to decide whether to charge Ferguson, Missouri, police officer Darren Wilson in the Aug. 9 shooting of unarmed African American teenager Michael Brown is concluding its supposedly secret deliberations now. (Or else, it's already done. Who knows?)

If its decision is announced between now and then, this entire piece will be rendered obsolete. Based on the pre-emptive reaction from officials in the St. Louis area over the last few days, though, I feel pretty confident postulating the likely outcome.

On Monday, Missouri Gov. Jay Nixon once again called up the National Guard and signed Executive Order 14-14, which instituted a pre-emptive state of emergency lasting through the next 30 days.

“Regardless of the outcomes of the federal and state criminal investigations, there is the possibility of expanded unrest,” it read, in part.

This announcement comes after a Federal Bureau of Investigation report issued last week sounded similar alarms.

“[The grand jury decision] will likely be exploited by some individuals to justify threats and attacks against law enforcement and critical infrastructure,” according to the bulletin obtained by CBS News Friday.

As if that wasn’t enough, members of the Traditionalist American Knights of the Ku Klux Klan have been passing out flyers in the area addressed “to the terrorists masquerading as ‘peaceful protesters.’”

“You have awakened a sleeping giant,” it reads. “We will use lethal force as provided under Missouri Law to defend ourselves. … You have been warned

by the Ku Klux Klan! There will be consequences for your acts of violence against the peaceful, law abiding citizens of Missouri."

Unsurprisingly, a report Thursday by ABC News' Steve Osunsami found a surge in gun sales in the surrounding areas.

"John Stephenson of Metro Shooting Supplies in nearby Bridgeton said he normally sells 10 to 15 guns a day. But for the last three weeks, he said he has been selling between 30 and 50 guns daily, a nearly 300 percent increase," Osunsami reported.

Meanwhile, the St. Louis County Police Department has similarly beefed up its crowd control arsenal in anticipation of the unrest.

"The department spent around $65,000 on riot gear including body armor, helmets, shields and batons, and more than $37,000 on tear gas grenades, smoke-and-gas grenades, pepper balls and plastic handcuffs," reported USA Today's Yamiche Alcindor Nov. 9.

This palpable tension has caused local organizations to request some modicum of warning prior to the announcement. The Don't Shoot Coalition's Proposed Rules of Engagement, issued earlier this month, requested 36 hours advance notice to attempt to de-escalate the situation. Hazelwood School District in Florissant, Missouri, has successfully arranged for advance notice of the grand jury announcement.

“The St. Louis County Prosecutor’s office informed school districts that if the grand jury’s decision is made on a weekend, school superintendents will be notified 24 hours prior to the information being released to the media,” read the letter issued by Grayling Tobias, Hazelwood superintendent, Thursday. “If a decision is reached during the week, school districts will be given three hours of advance notice. The three-hour window will allow us enough time to transport students home safely.”

I generally try to avoid making guesses like this, but I feel safe in my prediction of how the next few days will play out: Officials will wait for the wettest, dreariest day of the week (which from the National Weather Service forecast looks to be either Friday or Saturday) to announce no charges will be filed against Wilson. At that point, the us-vs.-them atmosphere that has been building will once again explode. (I can’t imagine all this preparation is in response to the fear of spontaneous jubilation over Wilson’s indictment.) And it will be ugly.

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